FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

An Eldritch Crime:

Supernatural Antidetective Fiction in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu"

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Abstract

This paper aims to categorize the short story "The Call of Cthulhu", by H. P. Lovecraft, as a supernatural antidetective story, on the basis of its seemingly detective-like structure and its genre-subversive ending. After defending the validity of this categorization, the essay links the story with the main characteristics of postmodernism, mainly its characteristically ontologic conflict. Finally, the essay points out Lovecraft's use of the postmodern struggle between worlds, and of the attack on positivism of the antidetective, to portray non-white social groups as irrational, as opposed to a supposedly rational WASP population.

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft, antidetective, positivism, postmodernism, supernatural.

Resumen

Este ensayo pretende categorizar el relato "La llamada de Cthulhu", de H.P. Lovecraft, como una historia antipolicial sobrenatural, basándose en su aparentemente estructura detectivesca y la subversión genérica de su desenlace. Tras argumentar la validez de esta categorización, el ensayo enlaza el relato con las características principales del posmodernismo, sobre todo el conflicto ontológico característico. Finalmente, se señala el uso por parte de Lovecraft de la lucha entre mundos posmoderna y del antipositivismo del antipolicial para presentar grupos sociales no blancos como irracionales, en contraposición con una población WASP supuestamente racional.

Palabras clave: H.P. Lovecraft, antipolicial, positivismo, posmodernismo, sobrenatural.

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I. Introduction and Summary

It would be a mistake to consider genres simply as a taxonomical tool. While they often serve that purpose, every genre has a structure and various recurrent elements that give it an ideological charge, stronger or weaker depending on the particular case, which cannot but be related with the worldview of artists. Building from that idea, here we will argue that Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu" (first published in the magazine *Weird Tales* in February 1928) categorizes as a supernatural antidetective story, and that the use of that subgenre's characteristic attack on positivism and reason is meant to dramatize what Lovecraft saw as a conflict between rational WASP society and an irrational foreign "invasion". In so doing, we will first offer our reasons to categorize "The Call of Cthulhu" as a supernatural antidetective story, highlighting its attack on positivist rationality; then we will connect this conflict between logic and the supernatural with postmodernism's ontological dominant; and, finally, we will point out the message Lovecraft tries to send through those features in particular.

"The Call of Cthulhu" is divided in three parts, each corresponding to one text read by the narrator. The first part, "The Horror in Clay", starts when the narrator finds among the papers of his deceased grand-uncle and professor of Semitic Languages, George Gamell Angell, a disordered collection of notes and a bas-relief representing an octopus-headed monster with a cryptic inscription at its foot. Reading Angell's notes, the narrator discovers that the sculpture came from an artist called Henry Anthony Wilcox, who declared that he made the bas-relief inspired by strange dreams and wanted to know what the inscription said. Unable to decipher the strange phrase, Angell starts investigating and discovers that many more people suffered from those dreams during the same period of time Wilcox did, and that they were mostly artists. The

second part, “The Tale of Inspector Legrasse”, also appears as a text among the papers of Angell, and tells how the policeman attended a meeting of archeologists to ask them about an idol, very similar to the bas-relief, which he confiscated after arresting the members of some kind of cult in New Orleans. One of the archaeologists tells him that he witnessed very similar rituals in an Esquimaux cult. The final part, “The Madness from the Sea”, has the narrator discover by chance a photography of an identical idol in an old newspaper article about Gustaf Johansen, a sailor who found an uncharted island and came back in bad shape as the only survivor of his crew. When he travels to Australia to talk to him, he finds out that Johansen is dead but has written down what he saw: after being assaulted by pirates, the crew arrived to an unknown island that turned out to be “the nightmare corpse-city of R’lyeh”, where they accidentally wake up Cthulhu, an evil god that was the source of the dreams and seems to be indestructible, and from which Johansen only barely escapes.

II. “THE CALL OF CTHULHU” AS A SUPERNATURAL ANTIDETECTIVE STORY

As one of the most representative works of an author known almost exclusively for his impact on horror literature, “The Call of Cthulhu” has not yet been recognized as a detective story, much less an antidetective one. Nonetheless, it checks more than enough boxes to be labelled as such. In his study on antidetective narratives, Stefano Tani identifies as the main characteristic of the subgenre the unexpectedness of the denouement’s subversive nature: “All the other elements must seem apparently unchanged so that the fiction at the beginning can be identified by the reader as a detective novel and reveal itself as a negation of the genre only at the end” (42). “TCoC” meets this requirement: the investigation is led by an archeology professor and

a policeman who try to unveil the truth through academic research and police work, which quickly makes the readers think they are reading a detective story. Later, these expectations will be frustrated by an outcome in which the source of the dreams and the origin of the cult turns out to be a sleeping submarine god whose existence represents an unsolvable problem for the human mind, and thus, not an acceptable solution for a detective. Tani later adds that "the nature of the crime or mystery often acquires during the development of the detection disturbing and unusual connotations (…)" (42). The weird dreams Angell investigates, the cult whose track Legrasse follows, the monstrous bas-relief that connects the two mysteries, are all contributors to the atmosphere of uncanniness Tani refers to.

This should suffice to make a strong case for the classification of "TCoC" as an antidetective story, but its particular characteristics further narrow down its genetics to the supernatural variety of the antidetective story, and thus makes it a subgenre related to the fantastic, as proved by Pardo's essay on the generic relations between detective fiction and the fantastic tale. According to Pardo, the supernatural detective story is a hybridisation of the fantastic with the detective in which the values of the first subvert those of the latter: "Si el policíaco es el contragénero racionalista del fantástico, [el relato antidetectivesco] reafirma la posición anti-racionalista del fantástico y lo utiliza como contragénero del policíaco" (155). "[D]os actitudes contrapuestas ante el misterio dramatizan el conflicto hasta este momento latente entre las dos explicaciones, la fantástica sugerida o intuida y la racional perseguida e ignorada" (Pardo 153). In "TCoC", these appear to be the signs of paranormal activity versus the narrator's skeptical attitude, which make clear the tension between the rational explanation and the irrational one, as the following line by the narrator proves: "(…) privately I suspected young Wilcox of having heard of the cult in some indirect way, and of having invented

a series of dreams to heighten and continue the mystery at my uncle's expense" (Lovecraft 396). The essay also proposes that this ideological attack is executed through the thwarting of the structure of detective fiction: "[E]sta subversión es aún más radical porque se llega a ella utilizando las convenciones y las formas del relato de lo racional, del policíaco (…)" (Pardo 154), which, as defended above, is the case of "TCoC".

The structural basis of the antidetective is, then, similar to that of the fantastic story as understood by Tzvetan Todorov, namely, the introduction of an unexpected element that disturbs the stability of a world: "El acontecimiento sobrenatural interviene para romper el equilibrio intermedio y provocar la larga búsqueda del segundo equilibrio" (Todorov 119). However, the antidetective story uses that disturbance not as something that motivates the search for balance as Todorov says it happens in the conventional fantastic, but as the ending of the story, a final mock-solution that signals an unarguable lack of balance and doesn't really solve anything. In its supernatural variant, this ending is of paranormal nature, which carries with it most of the ideological charge: a supernatural denouement cannot be explained by the natural laws that oriented the investigation, and thus their real effectivity is called in question. The supernatural is not used here as the catalyst of the plot, but as its final (undesired) destination, which in "TCoC" takes the form of the dormant god Cthulhu.

It must be pointed out that the mere use of fantastic elements in a detective story is not enough to subvert its basic message. The structural distinction between antidetective and fantastic tale with regard to their different use of the supernatural can be applied to detective stories like Blackwood's *John Silence*, where the supernatural is both the weapon of the crime and the means of its solution, but not the ending of the tale nor a subversion of its internal rules: "One of the recurring features of the psychic detective's craft as represented by the Herons, Blackwood and Hodgson was an attempt to explain

the mysteries of the supernatural world by association with an analytical approach. (…) The mechanism of the detective story remains intact until the dénouement" (Cook 18). As the ending still dramatizes the triumph of reason over irrationality (even if reason works through the supernatural), the ideological attack on detective fiction doesn't happen there.

Lovecraft's assault on detective fiction's exaltation of logicis present throughout most of the story. When professor Angell looks for more people affected by the dreams, "[a]verage people in society and business (…) gave an almost completely negative result, (…) scientific men were little more affected (…) [but] it was from artists and poets that the pertinent answers came" (Lovecraft 386). The people who provide him with clues for the resolution of the case are those related to the imagination, whereas scientific types are not of any help. The Poesque bi-part soul, composed by equal parts of creative (irrational, intuitive thought) and rational (based on logic), is here disrupted, the creative having a predominant role in the detection, the rational more a hindrance than anything. He also charges against logical thinking by picturing Angell and Legrasse's logic-directed detection not only as unable to reach useful conclusions, but also as leading to the event that will demonstrate reason's uselessness, a resource also pointed out by Pardo as a subversion of detective fiction values: "Nada puede ser tan subversivo como el hecho de que sean el detective y el científico, los representates por excelencia del orden racional, los guías que nos conducen a lo irracional" (Pardo 155).

And there is more: the detection is not only inconsequential, it also develops mostly through coincidences: the narrator, Angell's grand-nephew, only starts investigating and only finds clues in the investigation through sheer luck: he is the executor of his grand-uncle's will and, while going through his papers, reads about the Cthulhu Cult. Even more by chance, he gets to know about the existence of Johansen's text by a stray look

at an old newspaper that a mineralogist put under a stone, which gives him the lead to Johansen's wife and, through her, to the final text. In fact, Johansen's crew arrived at Cthulhu's location and woke Him up by accident: Johansen both discovered the true nature of the mystery (the narrator's and Angell's goal) and liberated Cthulhu (the Cthulhu Cult's goal) without intending to do it, nor having had contact with Angell's investigation or the Cthulhu Cult's beliefs.[1]

The narrator is almost as much a reader of the story as the actual readers, and has as little an impact on the events as the first two investigators, Angell and Legrasse. The process of detection is completely contingent to the solution of the mystery, which is "solved" by an unwilling part. Since detection stands for the application of reasoning to solve problems, both are revealed to be expendable.

In "The Call of Cthulhu", Lovecraft takes a stance directly opposed to the positivism of detective fiction through the subversion of many of its foundations and traditional features, but the viciousness of his charge against reason is nowhere as clear as in the denouement. There, the relevance of detection is not the only thing questioned: the truth of the basic laws of science is called into doubt, and even more striking is that this is done by turning them against themselves. Lovecraftian fiction often uses this technique to create an atmosphere of insecurity and fear of the unknown;[2] "TCoC" exploits it to the fullest during Johansen's discovery of Cthulhu's dwelling, a place where the laws of physics do not work: "he had said that the *geometry* of the dream-place he saw was

[1] This strategy of letting a sleuth reach the "right" conclusion by luck, and not through a logical process, in order to call in question the effectiveness of detection was also used in a referential antidetective work, *The Name of the Rose*. During their final confrontation, Jorge points out the contingent role of logic in William's victory: "You are proud to show me how, following the dictates of your reason, you arrived at me, and yet you have shown me you arrived here by following a false reasoning. What do you mean to say to me?", to which William answers: "To you, nothing. I am disconcerted, that is all. But it is of no matter. I am here." (Eco 547)

[2] As happens in "The Dreams in the Witch House": "Then came the shift as vast converging planes of a slippery-looking substance loomed above and below him" (Lovecraft 936); or in "At the Mountains of Madness": "There were geometrical forms for which an Euclid could scarcely find a name –cones of all degrees of irregularity and truncation; terraces of every sort of provocative disproportion (…) (Lovecraft 817).

abnormal, non-Euclidean (…)" (Lovecraft 404); "That tenebrousness was indeed a *positive quality;* for it obscured such parts of the inner walls as ought to have been revealed" (Lovecraft 405); "Johansen swears he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn't have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse" (Lovecraft 405).

Lovecraft's use of mathematical and physical concepts against themselves is yet another frontal attack against logic: "What better way to convey a sense of an unknown, alien, yet powerful landscape than to use mathematical language that (…) simultaneously conveys levels of mystery and legitimacy to the environment?" (Hull 11). Through specialized terminology, the tale is able to transmit a sense of failure: it is not that the events were not comprehended because the appropriate scientific framework was not applied, it is that this framework, through which we interpret the world and configure our relationships with it, is utterly unable to explain what happened. It must be taken into account that this encounter with the paranormal is coded as an encounter with the truth, the conclusion of the detection. In other words, logical thought clashes with supernatural truth: according to "The Call of Cthulhu", logic, reason, science, are things that stand no chance against such truth, therefore they are false. In the portrayed conflict between science and irrationality, the second easily wins.

III. Ontological Conflict and Xenophobia in "The Call of Cthulhu"

From what we have discussed so far, we are justified to understand "TCoC" as a dramatization of the struggle between two worlds, the world of reason and that of irrationality (or the supernatural). The hopeless denouement of "TCoC" is meant to suggest a world where natural rules don't apply, that is, a world different from that of

the sleuths. None of the investigators solves anything because they are trying to do so using logical methods that belong to a logical world, and therefore are useless in an irrational one. Thus, the conflictive non-solution of "TCoC" is caused not because of an epistemological problem (that is, related to how we know reality), but because of an ontological one (related to reality itself). According to Brian McHale, this is also the defining feature of postmodernism: "[T]he dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls 'post-cognitive': 'What world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10).

"TCoC" uses various strategies to emphasize that plurality of worlds, one of them being language. One of the main reasons for Professor Angell to start investigating the bas-relief was the cryptic inscription carved in it, written in an unknown language; the detail that made Legrasse (and by extension Angell) realize that the cult was a worldwide movement was the coincidence of the chanting he heard with the one an anthropologist witnessed: "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*," which also seemed to be the correct pronunciation of the inscription. As McHale states, "[d]ifferent languages (…) construct the world differently; in effect, they each construct different worlds. (…) If we accept this hypothesis, it follows that to juxtapose or superimpose different languages, registers, or discourses is to place different (…) worlds in tense confrontation" (*Constructing Postmodernism* 153-154). Language is an important point of entryaccess to the other world in the story, and not only through the inclusion of an alien one, but also by having human tongues serve as keys (or shields) to the horrible truth for some characters. In the case of Johansen's wife, "He had told her no more than he told the public, but had left a long manuscript --'of technical matters' as he said--

written in English, evidently in order to guard her from the peril of casual perusal" (Lovecraft 402). Not speaking English saved Johansen's wife from losing her mind, as happened to her husband and as the narrator implies would happen to anyone that had access to the texts: "I hope that no one else will accomplish this piecing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain" (Lovecraft 382). By creating distance between the characters and the truth through language they do not speak, and by insisting on the desirability of that distance, the tale establishes a clear distinction between the world of reason and the world of madness, at the same time sending the message of the first one being false and of the contribution of language to the construction of that illusory world[3].

Having pointed out that two worlds exist in conflict in "TCoC", one that is rational and one that is irrational, we can go on to consider what they stand for. Lovecraft tends to relate the supernatural and irrational elements of his tales with ethnic minorities, either through indirect portrayal or by direct relationships. The latter is the case in "TCoC": when Inspector Legrasse and his subordinates are about to catch the members of the Cthulhu Cult in the middle of a ritual, the region they enter is described as "one of traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men" (Lovecraft 391). Furthermore, when they arrest the cultists and take them to the police station, their description is as follows: "[T]he prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type. Most were seamen, and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes (…) gave a colouring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult" (Lovecraft 393). There are also mentions to some other chapters of the cult elsewhere

[3] And it is just an illusion. Joel Black has already written about the value of inaccessible texts in detective and antidetective fiction: "The fact that we never learn the contents of the purloined letter exponentially enhances our sense of its worth" (80). Throughout his work, Lovecraft never fully explains the nature of the civilization behind the alien language, making the reader all the more curious for something that is not really there. "But by the end of the metaphysical detective story (…), both reader and detective learn that the key text is less a signifier of the prize text than a substitute for it, and often a spurious one at that." (Black 80)

around the world that turn out to be "Esquimau diabolists and mongrel Louisianans" (Lovecraft 396); one of the prisoners tells the police that he had "talked with undying leaders of the cult in the mountains of China" (Lovecraft 394), and the *Necronomicon*, a book said to contain secrets related to Cthulhu and his kind, is said to have been written by "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (Lovecraft 395). Every single non-supernatural character on Cthulhu's side is either foreign or non-white, effectively linking ethnic minorities with irrationality, and thus setting them within one of the two worlds in conflict about which we have already talked.

This link is strengthened by yet another distinctive feature of the irrational in "TCoC": the chanting "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn"*. We have already mentioned this prayer as one of the elements that help build an alternative world to the natural one in the story, as it is an instance of an alien language (both literally and figuratively). The context in which this technique is used, however, gives it an extra charge of meaning: this alien phrase is only heard from the ethnic minorities mentioned above, establishing a parallelism with social groups that speak languages other than English in mostly anglophone countries. This way, the bond Lovecraft portrays between the irrational, the supernatural, and the foreign, gains clarity. Signalling that connection can be further justified by looking at certain political views of the author, who, while living in New York, described the non-white population of the city as "organic things-Italo-Semitic-Mongoloid" and "monstrous and…moulded [sic] from some stinking vicious slime of earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing…in a fashion suggestive of … deep-sea unnamabilities [sic]" (Qtd. in Reinert 269). Lovecraft, then, would have used the antidetective attack on positivism and rational thought, and its representation as a clash between the natural world and the fantastic one in the supernatural variation, to

dramatize the conflict he perceived between WASP and non-white groups, labelling the latter as irrational and even monstrous.

IV. CONCLUSION While far from being a canonical example of the genre, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" features both the structure of a detective story and an unexpectedly subversive ending reached by chance, therefore qualifying as a supernatural antidetective story. As such, it carries an ideological charge similar to that of the fantastic story, but, as its structure is a twist on that of detective fiction, it also serves to put the irrational visibly above the rational. "The Call of Cthulhu" portrays an attack on rationality from a vast, supernatural menace, which he then relates with non-WASP social groups, thus characterizing them as irrational and as a threat to be feared by his idea of a rational civilization. "The Call of Cthulhu" is one of the best-known Lovecraftian stories that use this kind of strategies to make that point, but is far from being the only one. Many of the stories that compose the so-called Cthulhu Mythos contain similar ideas, and some of them could also be considered antidetective stories if closely analysed,[4] as it proves to be a subgenre that can work as the basic blueprint for the kind of ideological discussion Lovecraft often includes in his fiction. The definition of genres and their application to already categorized works is an extremely useful tool to illuminate ideological positions; the reading of Lovecraftian tales through the lenses of the antidetective and the postmodern is likely to make easier both the analysis of his own work, its growing popularity many decades later, and the increasing amount of contemporary fiction inspired in or making reference to Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos.

[4] Some likely candidates would be "The Shadow Out of Time" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth". In the first, the protagonist traces back four years of his life of which he has no memory, only to discover that his body was hijacked by a member of an ancient species in preparation for a full invasion of the bodies of the entire humanity; in the latter, the narrator investigates a village populated by human-seafolk hybrids, and discovers himself to be part of that new species. Both stories feature the ontological conflict and the xenophobic implications we have exposed here.

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